Lesson 1

Monkey runs by Maya pyramid

From Riches to Ruin—Tales of Two Cities

The resources on which a culture is built help determine the fate of that culture. This lesson introduces students to the connection between physical geography, resources, and culture by allowing them to compare the climate and physical settings of the California ghost towns of Bodie and China Camp to the classic Maya city of Copan.

Students read two short pieces outlining the environment in which these cities existed, the resources upon which they depended, and the way in which people used these resources. Students identify similarities and differences between two cities and the way they rose and fell from prominence and note their observations on a chart. While completing these tasks students learn vocabulary important to the unit as a whole.

This lesson promotes systems thinking and sets the stage for the series of activities that follow by helping students to begin thinking about the relationships between culture, environment, and resource use in both California and pre-Columbian Latin America.

Background

The resources important to different societies and cultures over time affected the way people settled diverse areas across the globe. Comparing the story of the classic Maya city of Copan with two California ghost towns illustrates how the growth of cities depends on the connections between physical

Learning Objective

Discuss the role of physical geography, climate and the availability of natural resources in the development of Maya, Aztec, and Inca urban societies.

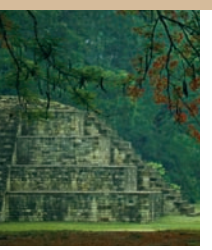
geography, resources, and culture.

The Motagua Valley lies at the junction of the North American, Caribbean, and Pacific plates, where folding and faulting formed rugged peaks and valleys and brought a diversity of rocks and minerals to the land's surface. The fertile agricultural valley where Copan arose sits in the foothills of this range, a place with reliable fresh water, rich soil, and other renewable resources attractive to human settlers.

This area also offered other unique resources that helped fuel the growth and expansion of the great city that rose to power between 426 and 700 CE (Common Era). Most notable among these was jade, which the Maya and other Meso-American cultures considered more precious than gold. The Sierra de Motagua is the largest source of high-quality jade in the Americas, and control of this area the people of Copan to accumulate vast wealth through trade.

The growth of Bodie depended on access to an important mineral resource, gold, a byproduct of the geological history of the area. But unlike Copan, where the landforms offered renewable resources that could support self-sustaining communities, Bodie depended largely on the importation of basic goods. Gold was so valuable in 1800s California that this resource alone could be exchanged for everything Bodie needed.

The shrimp fishery that supported China Camp was akin to the agricultural fields in the Copan Valley; both depended on a renewable resource that humans could exploit indefinitely if they did so in a rational way. Ultimately, China Camp and Copan both fell into decline largely due to an inability of their residents to control their use of renewable resources.



Carved jade

Key Vocabulary

Boom: In economic terms, a rapid increase in growth or development.

Bust: In economic terms, a sudden, rapid financial collapse.

Climate: The prevailing, average weather conditions of a particular area over time.

Landform: Any topographic features that makes up the earth's surface such as a plain, mountain, or valley.

Meso-America: The area from central Mexico to northern Central America where pre-Columbian civilizations flourished.

Nonrenewable resource: A natural resource, such as petroleum, that is not naturally replenished at a rate comparable to the rate of consumption.

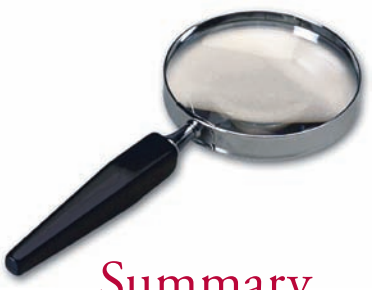
Physical geography: The branch of Earth science that deals with features of Earth's surface, including land formations, climate, currents, and the distribution of plants and animals.

Pre-Columbian: Referring to the cultures of the New World in the era before significant European influence.

Renewable resource: A natural resource, such as firewood, that can be replenished at a rate comparable to the rate of consumption.

Resource: Material such as soil, water, minerals, and energy reserves that natural systems produce and humans use.

Toolbox



Summary of Activities

Students read about the economic rise and fall of two California towns: Bodie and China Camp. They read a similar history of the Maya city of Copan. Using a chart and responding to questions, they compare the characteristics that allowed each to become a thriving town or city.

Instructional Support

See Extensions & Unit Resources, pages 32–33

Prerequisite Knowledge

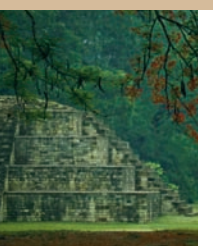
Students should be able to:

- state that resources are unequally distributed over Earth's surface.
- define the following terms: "renewable resource" and "nonrenewable resource."
- explain that even renewable resources (such as timber and water) can be exhausted if they are overharvested.

Advanced Preparation

Gather and prepare Activity Masters.

Gather and prepare Materials Needed.



Materials Needed

Activity supplies:

- Student Journals: one notebook or folder for each student; make sure folders include a slot where students can place handouts, maps, and other materials associated with the unit.

Visual Aids

No Visual Aids are required for this lesson.

Duration

Preparation Time
20 min.
Instructional Time
55 min.

Safety Notes

None

Activity Masters in the Supporting Materials (SM)

Key Unit Vocabulary
SM, Pages 11–12
One per student

California Connections: From Boom to Bust, California Ghost Towns
SM, Pages 13–16
One per student

Tales of Two Cities
SM, Pages 17–19
One per group of students

The Rise and Fall of a Maya City
SM, Pages 20–21
One per student

Procedures

Vocabulary Development

Use the **Key Unit Vocabulary** (Lesson 1 Activity Master) to introduce new words to students as appropriate. This vocabulary sheet will be used throughout the unit.

Step 1

Distribute student folders. Explain to students that they will use the folders to organize their work as they explore the roles of physical geography, climate, the availability of natural resources, and culture in the development of the great civilizations of Latin America in approximately 1500 CE (Common Era). Stress that students will need to keep all materials in one place for future reference throughout the unit.

Step 2

Ask students to picture a ghost town in their minds. Tell them to quietly consider answers to the questions: "What do you think a ghost town looks like?"; "How do you think such towns arose?"; "Why do you think these towns were abandoned?" Call on individual students to answer these questions about their imagined ghost towns. (*Accept all reasonable answers.*)

Step 3

As a class, read ***California Connections: From Boom to Bust, California Ghost Towns*** (Lesson 1 Activity Master). Ask individual students to read a paragraph aloud as the class follows along.

Step 4

Distribute **Tales of Two Cities** (Lesson 1 Activity Master). Instruct students to complete the first column of the chart using words to describe the climate, landforms, and resources that drew people to Bodie or China Camp. Review words from the key vocabulary list that students will need to complete **Tales of Two Cities**.

Step 5

Distribute copies of **The Rise and Fall of a Maya City** (Lesson 1 Activity Master) and ask students to read it individually. (*Note: The Maya city of Copan grew and declined before the vast changes to pre-Colombian societies that resulted from the coming of Europeans in the 1500s.*)

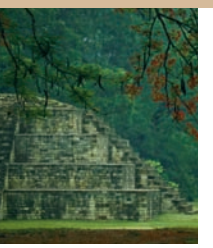
Step 6

Have students complete the second column of the chart **Tales of Two Cities** describing the city of Copan.

Step 7

Review the meaning of "renewable" and "nonrenewable" resources with students by asking them to orally define the terms.

Ask students to give examples of each of these terms using references from the three cities described in the readings. (*Shrimp is a renewable resource. Gold is non-renewable resource. Corn in the Copan valley was harvested and replanted in the rich soil using methods that maintained the productivity of the soil and the quantity and quality of the harvest. Shrimp in the San Francisco Bay began to be over-fished in a way that overtaxed the shrimp fishery and the ecosystem.)*



Step 8

Instruct students to answer the questions below the chart in the handout **Tales of Two Cities**. The questions address the similarities and differences between these cities and how these cities grew based on their landforms, climate, and the availability of natural resources. Organize students into small groups of two or three to discuss questions and answers. Review answers as a class, allowing students to adjust answers. If necessary, students can complete the questions as homework.

Step 9

Tell the class that over the coming lessons they will be studying how the unique landforms and resources of Mexico, Central America, and the Andes contributed to the rise of three of the great civilizations of the Americas: the Maya, Aztec and Inca.

Step 10

Collect **Tales of Two Cities** for use in assessment.

Lesson Assessment

Description

This lesson teaches students the role of physical geography, climate, and the availability of natural resources in the building of two California towns and a classic Maya city. As students complete **Tales of Two Cities** (Lesson 1 Activity Master) they demonstrate their understanding of how landforms, climate, and the availability and use of natural resources contributed to the development of urban centers in California and pre-Columbian Central America.

Suggested Scoring

Use the Answer Key on pages 41–43 to score **Tales of Two Cities**. Question 1 is worth a total of 18 points; each box in the chart is worth 1 point. Questions 2–6 are valued at 5 points each.

The total possible score for the assessment is 43 points.

Answer Key and Sample Answers

Tales of Two Cities

Lesson 1 Activity Master | *page 1 of 3*

Name: _____

1. Select a California town, either Bodie or China Camp, to describe in the left column. Describe the Maya City of Copan in the right column. In each box describe the factors (landforms, climate, resources, and resource use) that brought people to the town or city.

City: Bodie or China Camp (circle one)	**City:** Copan
Boom	**Boom**
Landform *Bodie: Sits at 8,375 feet (2,553 meters) in the high desert of eastern California. Sharp peaks of the eastern Sierra rise from the treeless scrubland.* *China Camp: Along the shore of San Pablo Bay. Across from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta in an area of mudflats, saltgrass, and pickleweed.*	**Landform** *A river valley with deep, rich, soil. Streams flow into it from the mountains.*
Climate *Bodie: Dry, cold climate.* *China Camp: Mild.*	**Climate** *Tropical. Sunny, warm and wet year-round.*
Resources *Bodie: Gold, silver.* *China Camp: Bay shrimp and other marine resources.*	**Resources** *Rich soil, water, cacao, wood, corn, beans, chiles, volcanic rocks for carving.*
Resource Use *Bodie: Gold and silver were exported to support the town. Railroad was built to bring in lumber.* *China Camp: Shrimp was dried for export and local consumption.*	**Resource Use** *Soil and water were used to grow crops. Wood and stone for building temples. Corn and beans were eaten. Jade and shell were made into jewelry. Cacao and chiles were made into a sacred drink.*
Bust	**Bust**
Landform *Bodie: Harsh, dry peaks of the eastern Sierra.* *China Camp: The bay became increasingly polluted.*	**Landform** *The landscape was not being heavily cultivated and most of the forest had been cut down.*
Climate *Bodie: Dry and cold* *China Camp: Mild*	**Climate** *An extended drought set in in approximately 800 CE.*

Name: _____

City: Bodie or China Camp (circle one)	**City:** Copan
Resources *Bodie: The ore became inaccessible to miners. Gold became so expensive to extract that it was no longer profitable.* *China Camp: Catches of shrimp declined*	**Resources** *The quantity of resources brought to other towns dwindled because of diminished trade routes and less productive farming.*
Resource Use *Bodie: Resources needed to be imported for basic living.* *China Camp: Fishing methods that were successful were no longer used due to social and political factors.*	**Resource Use** *Soil and water were used to grow crops. Wood and stone were used to build temples. Corn and beans were eaten. Jade and shell were made into jewelry. Cacao and chiles were made into a sacred drink.*
Social factors that impacted resource use *Bodie: Regulations only allowed mining that contributed to the war effort.* *China Camp: Regulations were passed limiting the use of traditional Chinese fishing methods and technology.*	**Social factors that impacted resource use** *Copan's king was captured and there was no leadership in the city. Trade routes shut down. There were no longer any alliances with other cities. Laws were no longer enforced. There were no longer large public gatherings of people.*

2. Name three renewable and three nonrenewable resources discussed in these stories.

Renewable resources: Shrimp, wood, soil, water, wood, corn, beans, shell, cacao, chiles.

Nonrenewable resources: Gold, silver, obsidian, jade.

3. Describe one way that resources influenced the growth of **one** of these cities: Bodie, China Camp or Copan.

Bodie: *Gold attracted money from investors who helped build the city. The wealth earned from mining supported industries that met the needs of the miners.*

China Camp: *Shrimp provided income for Chinese fishermen in shrimping camps along the bay.*

Copan: *Agricultural resources contributed to the growth of villages in the river basin. Volcanic stone was used to build palaces and temples. Jade and cacao were exported to distant parts of Meso-America and traded for luxury goods that brought wealth into the city.*

Answer Key and Sample Answers

Tales of Two Cities

Lesson 1 Activity Master | *page 3 of 3*

Name: _____

4. How were Bodie, China Camp, and Copan similar?

All of the cities depended on valuable resources to grow. Their locations were based on easy access to these valuable resources.

5. How were Bodie, China Camp, and Copan different?

The resources considered valuable in each place were different (gold in Bodie, shrimp in China Camp, jade and cacao in Copan). Copan was relatively self-sustaining. It had a base of agricultural resources and had access to specialized luxury goods. Both China Camp and Bodie were founded based on the abundance of a single resource. China Camp's resource was renewable. Bodie's resource was nonrenewable.

6. What roles did physical geography, climate, and the availability and use of resources have on the growth of these cities?

Bodie had gold. This resource brought people and the city grew. The area was treeless. The climate was cold and harsh and people had to bring in food, wood to build the mines, and other services by train or wagon.

China Camp had access to water and resources such as shrimp and other marine life. The mild climate made working in China Camp easier than in Bodie. This ready availability of resources brought workers and the city grew. The workers had access to other communities to obtain supplies.

Copan had rich soil and good farming. People there had access to luxury goods such as jade and cacao. They had tropical, warm, and wet weather year-round. The resources and the year-round warm, wet climate brought people to Copan. The climate helped the city to grow and people there began trading resources with other small communities.

Abiotic: Related to the non-living components or factors such as, soil, water, precipitation, and temperature.

Amaranth: A plant grown throughout Latin America whose seeds are useful as a high protein grain.

Amber: Translucent yellow, orange, reddish or brown fossilized resin that is valued as a gemstone.

Biotic factors: Related to the living components, such as plants, animals and microbes, or factors within natural systems.

Boom: In economic terms, a rapid increase in growth or development.

Bust: In economic terms, a sudden, rapid financial collapse.

Cacao: A Central-American tree whose seeds are used to make cocoa and chocolate.

Cenote: A sinkhole or natural well in the limestone bedrock that facilitated access to the water table by the Maya.

Chia: A plant in the mint family whose seeds are edible and highly nutritious.

Climate: The prevailing, average weather conditions of a particular area over time.

Cochineal: A bright red dye made from the dried bodies of the small cactus-feeding cochineal insect that is found primarily in Mexico.

Copal: A hard resin derived from a variety of tropical trees that is used as incense and to make varnish.

Ecosystem: A specific area containing a characteristic set of interdependent species that interact with each other and the abiotic components found there.

Ecosystem goods: Tangible materials produced by natural systems that are essential to humans, our economies and cultures.

Ecosystem services: Functions and processes in natural systems that are essential to humans, our economies, and cultures.

Equator: An imaginary line equidistant from the poles and perpendicular to the axis of Earth's rotation.

Goods: Tangible materials important to human economies and cultures. (Note: goods may or may not be the result of natural processes.)

Landform: Any topographic features that makes up the earth's surface such as a plain, mountain, or valley.

Leeward: The direction downwind from a geographic feature or object such as a ship.

Loincloth: Strip of cloth worn around the waist and between the legs.

Maguey: Desert agave plant that yields fiber and a sweet, honey-like syrup that can be distilled into tequila.

Meso-America: The area from central Mexico to northern Central America where pre-Columbian civilizations flourished.

Mit'a: Mandatory labor of Inca subjects that was often used for completing large public projects.

Key Unit Vocabulary

Lesson 1 Activity Master | *page 2 of 2*

Montane: Pertaining to, growing in, or inhabiting mountainous regions.

Natural systems: The interacting, interrelated, and interdependent components, processes, cycles, and interactions among organisms and their habitats.

Nonrenewable resource: A natural resource, such as petroleum, that is not naturally replenished at a rate comparable to the rate of consumption.

Obsidian: A volcanic glass that can be used to make sharp knives and other tools.

Physical geography: The branch of Earth science that deals with features of Earth's surface, including land formations, climate, currents, and the distribution of plants and animals.

Pre-Columbian: Referring to the cultures of the New World in the era before significant European influence.

Progenitor: An ancestor or forefather in a direct line.

Quetzal: A Central-American bird known for its bright green and red feathers and the male's long tail feather.

Quinoa: A plant grown for its edible seeds that was an Inca food source in the Andes for 6,000 years.

Quolla: Inca storehouse.

Rain shadow: An area with little precipitation that lies on the leeward (downwind) side of a mountain.

Renewable resource: A natural resource, such as firewood, that can be replenished at a rate comparable to the rate of consumption.

Resource: Material such as soil, water, minerals, and energy reserves that natural systems produce and humans use.

Socialist system: An economic system in which the production and distribution of wealth is controlled by the government rather than private individuals and business.

Transect: A line or a strip of vegetation that cuts across a particular area, used for study purposes.

Tribute: 1. Money paid by one ruler or nation to another. 2. Any exacted or enforced payment.

Tropics: The region of the earth between the tropics of Cancer (23˚27' N latitude) and Capricorn (23˚27' S latitude).

Tzompantli: Aztec skull rack, displayed prominently to reinforce Aztec control over towns and provinces.

Weather: State of the atmosphere (temperature, moisture, wind and other atmospheric conditions) at a given time and place.

From Boom to Bust, California Ghost Towns

Part I: The Wild West

Many people still associate California with the Wild West. They remember the rough frontier and the promise of wealth that drew cowboys and fortune hunters. Television and movie Westerns keep these memories strong. These shows continue to be popular, glamorizing this era more than 50 years after the gold rush.

What is the truth behind the glamour of these so-called wild places? Some of them grew rich quickly (boomed), went broke quickly (busted), and then left their abandoned corpses as ghost towns. How did the way people used resources seal the fates of these towns?

Two ghost towns tell the story. Bodie, located high in the eastern Sierra, promised riches that outweighed its bleak climate. China Camp, a village founded in the 1870s in the mild climate of San Francisco Bay, held its own proverbial goldmine in the form of shrimp. The fates of these two towns closely resembled each other, despite the towns' many differences.

Bodie

Bodie Boom

The town of Bodie sprouted in a treeless scrubland at 8,375 feet (2,553 meters), where the peaks of the eastern Sierra rise sharply from the high desert of eastern California. Until the 1800s, the dry, cold climate and rugged landscape supported only small numbers of n
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Drawing of China Camp children

investors who fueled the town's growth. With the financial backing in place for the costly operations needed to extract the ore, Bodie boomed. The Standard Mining Company began massive mining operations, and earned more than $784,000 from gold and silver in 1877 (approximately $446,000,000 in 2008 dollars). This bonanza drew hundreds of prospectors, especially as reports spread that ore gushed from a gigantic vein. Early luck led to overly optimistic and ever-bigger investments.

With a single industry at the base of its economy, Bodie developed into a gamble. Certain goods needed to support mining did not exist in the local ecosystem; for example, townsfolk needed wood for construction, mineshaft beams, and heating, but Bodie had few trees. The Bodie and Benton Railway formed in 1881 just to bring in lumber.

Despite the lack of local resources, many services developed to support people in the growing city. Bodie became known as a brash town full of saloons and gambling halls. The real-life version of a Western movie, behavior in Bodie resulted in many shoot-outs and near daily body counts.

Growth of China Camp

Many former Chinese railroad workers, originally brought to the U.S. because they represented "cheap" labor, found themselves out of work after the gold rush. In the 1870s and 1880s many of these workers headed toward the coast and the mild climate of the San Francisco Bay.

Fed by the silt-laden waters of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the San Francisco Bay offered a diversity of marine resources, including the delicious California bay shrimp. Saltgrass around the bay supported huge populations of these creatures in the mid-1800s.

Many Chinese in California hailed from the Pearl River Delta, where shrimping was a well-established industry; the new settlers used the same skills to duplicate their success in Northern California. Chinese immigrants settled in numerous "shrimp camps" on San Francisco and San Pablo bays. China Camp, on the shores of San Pablo Bay directly across from the delta in an area of extensive mudflats, saltgrass, and pickleweed, was the largest of these camps, with 500 residents at its peak.

Like Bodie, China Camp consisted mainly of men. The camp provided a few services and shops, including a marine supply store. Shrimpers in China Camp coordinated their efforts by circling their boats close together; they ate, drank tea, and relaxed as a group as the tide swept shrimp into nets set in tidal mudflats. These shrimpers pulled in large catches thanks to their special bag nets. Initially they dried most of the catch and sent it back to China. By 1885 the fishermen were bringing in more than 500,000 pounds of shrimp for export and local consumption.

Part 2: The Wild West

Bodie's Bust

The gold in Bodie lasted only a few years. After peaking in mid-1880 at about 7,000, the population dropped to 3,000 by 1882, when several mining companies went bankrupt. An earthquake made a major mine inaccessible and the miners decided it would be too difficult and expensive to relocate. With the town's only industry fading, people went elsewhere for opportunities.

The town lingered on as a few citizens tried to make a simple living off the land. But a harsh winter from 1878 to 1879 claimed hundreds of lives from exposure, disease, and a gunpowder explosion. A major fire in 1937 all but leveled what remained of the town.

Mining continued on a smaller scale until 1942, when a new law passed and limited mining to endeavors that aided the war effort. Bodie had to be self-reliant to survive, so when the town could no longer tap its minerals for profit the population dwindled to a few families. The last family left in 1962. Because Bodie was so remote, residents found it nearly impossible to bring their belongings with them when they left. Many of these items remain in Bodie today, forming a well-preserved ghost town full of artifacts now protected as Bodie State Historic Park.

Crash at China Camp

As demand for bay shrimp grew locally, so did discontent with the success of the Chinese. The anti-Chinese sentiment from the part

Bodie State Park

Shrimp boat at China Camp

Unemployed miners traveled to San Francisco looking for ways to live off the land; with little work to go around, non-Chinese fishermen pressured the government to weaken the competition.

People began blaming the bay's degrading ecosystem on habitat damage caused by the Chinese shrimpers. Pressure led to prohibitive new laws that required special licenses, limited the fishing season, outlawed traditional Chinese fishing techniques, prohibited export, and restricted catch size.

By blaming the Chinese for the bay's decline, legislators overlooked other possible causes, such as the disposal of untreated sewage and the diversion of fresh water by cities. The outlawing of bag nets in 1911 proved the final blow to the Chinese shrimping industry. Eventually only one family-run company remained at China Camp. That family sold the town to California Department of Parks and Recreation in 1976; what remains can be visited at China Camp State Park.

Boom and Bust Cycles

Each of these towns provided one plentiful resource, but residents faced different challenges accessing the resources. During Bodie's boom, financing helped overcome tough physical geography to mine a wealth of minerals. The town went bust when a natural disaster cut off its main way to access these minerals. China Camp boomed because the settlers matched their rich fishing know-how with abundant bay resources. The bust came when social and political pressures kept the shrimpers from using their skills at a time when pollution and other factors increasingly impacted the bay's resources.

To survive over the long term, a community needs steady access to a variety of resources. Both China Camp and Bodie depended so heavily on a single resource that they could not survive when that resource declined or became inaccessible. This problem is typical of many economies based on natural resources.

The Rise and Fall of a Maya City

Maya ball game

Imagine a landscape blanketed in jungle, surrounded by rugged hills topped with pine and oak. This land is one of sun and rain, a region that is wet and warm all year. Rivers tumble from the mountains, eroding the hillsides into flat valleys filled with deep soils. Here in northern Central America, people settled and began farming the rich land as early as 1400 BCE (Before Common Era). People grew corn, beans, peppers, and other products with the ample rain and sunshine. They lived simple lives in small villages.

This way of life changed in 426 CE (Common Era), when a lord invaded the valley and founded the city of Copan. He erected temples, palaces, and monuments. The mountains around the city consisted of stone that was perfect for carving. As the city grew, artists created some of the most impressive public monuments in the Maya world. The monuments included a staircase covered in sculpted hieroglyphic writing.

By 600 CE, Copan had become a prospering and powerful city and had established outlying colonies. The most important was Quiriguá, located in the only valley in the Americas that contained the precious stone jade. At the height of its influence, Copan was a bustling city. More than 25,000 people farmed the rich valley. They traded nonrenewable resources such as jade and volcanic rock, as well as renewable resources such as shell, wood, and cacao (the beans from which chocolate is made).

This major city was connected to locations thousands of miles away, via mountains that

provided obsidian (a volcanic glass used to make knives and other sharp tools), gold mines, and salt works.

Thousands of peasants supported their own families and several hundred nobles. The nobles lived in palaces that included scribes, priests, and artists. They oversaw public projects, formed and broke alliances with neighboring cities, and offered prayers for the community's well being.

Standing on top of a brightly painted temple in Copan in 700 CE, you would have looked over a vast, bustling city. Below, markets were filled with food, gold, jade, cacao, and feathers. As you looked into the distance, you would have seen thousands of thatched homes surrounded by fields where farmers busily tended corn and beans. This land was truly a place of plenty.

When John Lloyd Stephens, one of the first outsiders to visit Copan, first glimpsed the city in 1839, he mused about the ruins:

"It lay before us like a shattered bark in the midst of the ocean, her masts gone, her name effaced, her crew perished, and none to tell whence she came, to whom she belonged, how long on her voyage, or what caused her destruction; her lost people to be traced only by some fancied resemblance in the construction of the vessel, and, perhaps never to be known at all." (Incidents of Travel in Chiapas, Central America, and Yucatan, 1841)

Looking over this prosperous center in 700 CE, nobody would have guessed it would be completely abandoned in just more than 200 years.

The first blow came in 738 CE when Copan's king was seized and killed during a state visit to the nearby city of Quiriguá.

Maya village

Over the next hundred years, various relatives and other nobles tried to take the throne and did so for short periods of time, but by 822 CE there was no longer any royal presence in Copan. Without a clear ruler to lead the people, the city began to break down. Trade networks and alliances were abandoned, laws were not enforced, and religious and political order ceased to exist and bring the large population together.

Due to its location in an enclosed valley, Copan had limited land for farming. At one time the valley was mostly forested, but by this time that forest had all been cut down. The whole valley bottom was cultivated and its fertility began to decline with increasingly intensive use. Farmers tried to grow more food on their land by putting in more crops in smaller areas. Despite these efforts, production dropped, facilitated by a long drought that lasted for many years.

With less productive land and less access to goods from other cities, people began to leave the area. By 950 CE, Copan had only half of the population that had lived there 200 years earlier. Copan was completely abandoned by 1300 CE, leaving the once glorious temples and palaces to be enveloped by tropical forest.